

The Lincoln-Douglas Debate in Alton

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The last Lincoln–Douglas Debate occurred on October 15, 1858, at Alton, Illinois. More than five thousand people attended, but many in the audience were not even from Illinois, indicating how intensely people wanted to learn about the two Illinois candidates running for the U.S. Senate. The debate, like the others before it, followed a strict format.

Douglas spoke first for an hour; Lincoln responded for an hour and a half; Douglas then concluded by refuting Lincoln’s claims and adding closing remarks for half an hour.

Stephen Arnold Douglas, born in 1813 in Vermont, was a member of the Democratic Party and a U.S. Senator. Lincoln, born in Kentucky in 1809, was affiliated with the newly established Republican Party. Both men focused primarily on slavery during the Alton debate.

Douglas argued that each state should determine whether individuals could legally own slaves within its jurisdiction. He believed that states themselves could settle this issue without jeopardizing either the Union or the federal government’s ability to function effectively:

I then said, have often repeated and now again assert, that in my opinion this government can endure forever, divided into free and slave states as our fathers made it – each state having the right to prohibit, abolish or sustain slavery just as it pleases.

Douglas called the state’s right to determine its own laws “equality among all the states.”

His reasoning with regard to slavery was straightforward: the federal government should

not establish laws establishing slavery because each state deserved to do so itself. He stated:

This government was made upon the great basis of the sovereignty of the States, the right of each state to regulate its own domestic institutions to suit itself, and that right was conferred with the understanding and expectation that inasmuch as each locality had separate interests, each locality must have different and distinct local and domestic institutions, corresponding to its wants and interests.

Douglas' notion of popular sovereignty placed authority strictly in the hands of the majority. This majority, it should be noted, included only free men, not slaves. Douglas, moreover, did not support popular sovereignty at the federal level. Since each state had different needs, each state had to create its own laws.

Douglas presented his arguments so well that people feared for their freedom. To emphasize his position, Douglas used a number of rhetorical strategies during his presentation. For example, he frequently restated or reviewed an idea so that the audience became familiar with it. He also directly attacked Lincoln's beliefs. At one point, for instance, he stated that Lincoln and the Republican Party were against the Union because they opposed states determining their own slave laws. Douglas also argued that Lincoln merely wanted to create controversy among states by forcing them to abolish slavery. He concluded by pointing out specific flaws in Lincoln's thinking.

Lincoln, on the other hand, vehemently opposed slavery during the Alton debate. He considered slavery immoral, regardless of how many supported it. He believed that all men were equal and found support for his argument in the Constitution. He argued, moreover, that justice must be based on preset standards, not on popular vote. Lincoln

also asserted that the presence of slavery depended on whether it was fair to all people in the Union and not whether it was fair only to those who were free. Since most slaves hated bondage, Lincoln tried to represent their point of view. He also noted that those who first introduced slavery imposed it on all the people in the Union, thus making slavery unjust. Lincoln realized that people in southern Illinois were afraid to speak out against slavery and that they silently accepted it. He argued:

How many Democrats are there about here who have left slave States and come into the free state of Illinois to get rid of the institution of slavery?...I will ask you, if the policy you are now advocating had prevailed when this country was in a territorial condition, where would you have gone to get rid of it? Where would you have found your free state or territory to go to? And when hereafter, for any cause, the people in this place shall desire to find new homes, if they wish to be rid of the institution, where will they find the place to go to?.

Lincoln sympathized with those who were too timid to speak out. He tried to connect with them during the debate in order to excite them and to help them recognize the negative aspects of slavery.

In conclusion, both Douglas and Lincoln raised important points during the Alton debate. Both forced the audience to examine their views on slavery, and both argued persuasively. The crowd responded enthusiastically by shouting positive and negative comments throughout and by cheering when their favorite candidate argued well. In short, people were moved by both of these compelling speakers. [From Lionel Crocker, *An Analysis of Lincoln and Douglas as Public Speakers and Debaters*; "Stephen Arnold Douglas, (1813 - 1861)." *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*.

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